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Role of the U.S. In Persian Gulf: How It Evolved

Saudis' Aid Request Led to a New Policy in Area

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 11 — Late in the evening on Sept. 26, the Central Intelligence Agency received an urgent message from its station chief in Saudi Arabia saying that Saudi leaders, anxious about a possible attack from Iran, wanted prompt American military help.

With the conflict between Iran and Iraq threatening to increase, that Friday night request triggered a series of weekend meetings in which President Carter's military and foreign policy advisers debated, sometimes heatedly, several alternatives for dispatching air and naval forces to Saudi Arabia.

The alternatives raised basic questions about the United States' military commitment to the Saudis, about its involvement in the Persian Gulf conflict, and about Soviet attitudes toward an American buildup near the fighting.

Closer Saudi Collaboration Seen

The immediate result of the deliberations was seemingly limited to the publicized decision, announced Sept. 29, to send four radar warning planes to Saudi Arabia. But in the view of participants, the debate, a more far-reaching consequence may turn out to be closer military collaboration with the Saudis.

Last January, in the so-called Carter Doctrine, the President declared that the United States was prepared to use military force to protect oil supplies in the Persian Gulf from outside threats. But the United States, in responding to Saudi Arabia's concern over becoming embroiled in the Iranian-Iraqi war, may have gone a step further in raising the possibility of injecting American mili-

tary power in internal regional conflicts to assure a continued flow of oil.

Although two weeks have passed since that crucial series of meetings, the debate is still generating controversy. Defense Secretary Harold Brown and Zbigniew Brzezinski, the White House national security adviser, are known to believe that the American actions have enhanced the credibility of President Carter's earlier promise to protect vital Western interests in the Persian Gulf.

But Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie and his aides, concerned about Arab sensitivities and about maintaining the neutrality of both Moscow and Washington in the Iranian-Iraqi conflict, are said to be wary of the United States' becoming too deeply involved.

A number of participants in the discussion agreed to be interviewed on the condition that they were not identified. They disclosed the following:

¶ The dispatch of the radar planes was the minimum military response under consideration. All the officials agreed on this aspect, but consideration was also given to the sending of advanced F-14 and F-15 fighter planes to protect Saudi oil facilities against any Iranian air strikes. In addition, officials discussed the stationing of several hundred American military technicians to operate Hawk anti-aircraft missile batteries.

¶ Consideration of the Saudi request was overshadowed by concern that Iraq was about to launch attacks against Iran from Oman and Saudi Arabia. President Carter asked that the two countries be discouraged from becoming so involved.

¶ The United States' prompt response is thought to have bolstered its prestige in Saudi Arabia. It is possible that the Saudis would not have agreed to increase their oil production had the United States spurned their appeal.

¶ The meetings highlighted differences among Mr. Carter's advisers. Mr. Muskie seemed more concerned about maintaining diplomatic credibility with Moscow, while Mr. Brown and Mr. Brzezinski focused on the long-term strategy for building up American forces in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.

U.S. Lacks Leverage on Two Sides

When the Iraqi-Iranian conflict broke out on Sept. 22, after weeks of minor clashes, the United States' policy was one of neutrality. Lacking any leverage in either country, the United States looked to a quick end to the fighting and to limiting its possible spread. High priority was also given to keeping the Soviet Union from increasing its influence in the area.

Consequently, the Administration decided to avoid any show of force. An American naval fleet, consisting of two carrier battle groups, stayed in the Arabian Sea, while diplomats urged Arabs and other nations, including the Soviet Union, to exercise restraint and to press the belligerents to accept a cease-fire.

Officials were particularly concerned how Moscow might exploit the situation, either by moving closer to Iraq or by gaining a foothold in Iran if it were defeated. By coincidence, Mr. Muskie had a long-scheduled meeting with Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko of the Soviet Union in New York on Sept. 25.

Pledge of Soviet Nonintervention

The occasion was used to gain a pledge of nonintervention by the superpowers in the conflict. Mr. Muskie is said to have told Mr. Gromyko that it was in both countries' interests to adopt a hands-off policy. Mr. Gromyko reportedly gave the Secretary of State a message from Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, affirming a policy of nonintervention.

As a result of the meeting, there was no special urgency on Friday, Sept. 26, when Mr. Carter and his advisers held a regular weekly meeting over breakfast. That afternoon, in fact, Mr. Muskie flew to Kennebunk, Me., for the weekend.

But late that night, Mr. Brzezinski received a telephone call at his home in McLean, Va., from the White House situation room, the crisis center in the west wing basement, passing on a message from Adm. Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence. Admiral Turner reported that Saudi officials feared an imminent attack on Saudi oilfields by Iranian fighters.

The Saudis were alarmed because they had allowed some Iraqi planes to land on their airfields and had permitted other Iraqi planes to fly through their airspace to Oman. The Iranians had warned publicly that they might retaliate against any country aiding Iraq.

Saudi Request Was Not Specific

In the message received by the C.I.A., the Saudis not only asked for help but indicated that they were prepared to take action if necessary against Iran.

Mr. Brzezinski immediately called an early morning meeting on Saturday of second-level officials to prepare an agenda for another meeting later in the day of senior officials. At 8 A.M. he called Mr. Brown and Warren M. Christopher, the Deputy Secretary of State, who was in charge while Mr. Muskie was in Maine, to brief them on the situation.

The Saudi message, sent through intelligence channels, was not a formal note and was vague on what specific steps the United States should take. At the early morning session, officials therefore assembled a range of options.

At a minimum, officials agreed, the radar planes were the best choice for bolstering Saudi defenses. Such planes had been dispatched to Saudi Arabia once before, in March 1979, during a conflict between Yemen and the Southern Yemen.

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